



## Memorandum

To: Mayor Ruthanne Fuller and the Members of the School Committee  
From: Councilors Marc Laredo, Joshua Krintzman, Rebecca Walker Grossman, David Kalis, Brenda Noel, Emily Norton, Allan Ciccone, Jr., Christopher Markiewicz, Leonard Gentile, Pamela Wright, Julia Malakie, and R. Lisle Baker  
Re: Reopening our Schools for In-Person Learning  
Date: October 27, 2020

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We are writing in regard to the status of reopening our schools for in-person learning. We are aware of how difficult it is to navigate the many competing interests and logistical challenges involved with reopening our schools during a pandemic. However, we are quite concerned with what appears to be a lack of urgency and prioritization on reopening our schools for in-person learning to the fullest extent possible.

We have seen that many private schools and neighboring communities (including those whom we consider our peer communities) have already met this challenge, have already opened for in-person education, and do not seem to be experiencing significant problems from having reopened.

The scientific and pediatric experts state that we can reopen our schools safely if appropriate safeguards (such as required use of masks) are in place. More importantly, the public health officials in Newton have repeatedly reassured us that there is currently no public health reason why the schools must remain closed to many students.

The benefits of having students directly engage with one another and with their teachers are well-known. Our community rightly prides itself on valuing the social and emotional well-being of our children and we believe that their overall well-being is being harmed by the lack of in-person learning. Of course, if our scientific and pediatric experts advise us that schools cannot safely remain open, then we must immediately return to remote learning until it is safe to reopen. But until such time as the public health experts recommend closing, our schools must reopen as quickly as possible for all children who are able to engage in in-person learning.

We have repeatedly asked Mayor Fuller and Superintendent Fleishman whether there is any health, financial, or building safety reason why our schools cannot be reopened for in-person learning and have been assured that none of these are issues. We believe this to be an accurate assessment and we are pleased that is the case. Therefore, we will summarize what we understand the obstacles to be at each level:

### Elementary Schools

While our elementary schools have partially reopened for in-person learning, we recently learned that plans to have more robust in-person learning have been postponed indefinitely for two reasons: inability to hire part-time staff to supervise students and contractual limitations on specialists being in the schools. Neither, in our opinion, should be an obstacle.

As for part-time staff, we urge you to take whatever measures are needed to hire the needed staff. If additional resources are needed, please ask the City Council for those resources. In regard to the specialists, our understanding is that you have agreed to contractual provisions that allow them to work remotely. If that is the

case, it is important that you publicly explain to the school community why that was done and renegotiate the contracts if needed. Put simply, when the needs of Newton children are not being met, it is up to us to figure out how to meet their needs, even during these difficult times.

### Middle Schools

The middle schools are scheduled to reopen in mid-November. Since the opening of the middle schools depends on hiring of staff to assist teachers who are working remotely, we are concerned that the hybrid reopening plans may face the same staffing issues as the elementary schools. If that is the case, then the measures that we suggest for the elementary schools should be used here as well.

### High Schools

Our high schools are scheduled to be remote for the “foreseeable future.” Most recently, you have formed a task force to look at re-opening with a report scheduled to be provided in mid- December. Notably, the Newton Teachers Association is not part of that working group even though we have been advised that contractual issues affect the ability to reopen.

This course of action does not address the urgent nature of the situation. Respectfully, there are existing models from our peer communities that we can readily examine and adopt (and the fact that some of these districts are smaller than ours is not a limiting factor – we have two independent high schools, each of which is the approximate size of these communities’ high schools). Moreover, the state had required all school districts to prepare for three alternative types of learning – full in-person, hybrid, and full remote - this past summer.

In sum, we know there will be significant logistical challenges ahead and trade-offs to make. But we are a great community, a community of doers who do not shy away from the toughest of challenges, and we are up to the task. We certainly understand the importance of proceeding with caution - we agree with this. But, proceed we must. While we survey and discuss, other school systems have and continue to take action. We urge you to proceed forthwith to get our schools reopened for in-person learning to the greatest extent possible. As City Councilors, we pledge to work collaboratively with you to achieve this goal.